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Review Article

Can. Phil. — The Very Idea!

The Idea of Canada and the Crisis of Community. By Leslie Armour. Ottawa: Steel Rail Publishing, 1981. Pp. xviii, 180. Paper, \$9.95.

The Faces of Reason: An Essay on Philosophy and Culture in English Canada 1850-1950. By Leslie Armour and Elizabeth Trott. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1981. Pp. xxvi, 548.

A distinguished colleague, in his Presidential Address to the Canadian Philosophical Association, recalled:

When I first came to Toronto in 1950 I asked my new colleagues what Canadian philosophy was. My mentors could only point to their own practice, which they called the Toronto school of intellectual history, a wholly sceptical and relativistic style of history that grew up around G. S. Brett. It had indeed its own character, but its members found intellectual comradeship not in Canada but here and there in the United States. In the rest of Canada it appeared that there were the Quebecois, who seemed to be Thomists; a cluster of Presbyterians at Kingston, all apparently produced by cloning from John MacMurray of Edinburgh; and the peasantry.¹

Our laughter was partly embarrassed; we knew that we should know better and that we didn't. Sparshott, however, went on to say that we needn't feel a duty to relearn our past, and to challenge us instead to do work which future generations would study, "not as a penance, but as a privilege".²

Meanwhile, Leslie Armour and Elizabeth Trott had been doing penance for years. They are not alone in this work. Indeed, one of the philosophers whom they study is John A. Irving, who returned to the University of Toronto after the Second World War. By the time of his death in 1965, Irving had made substantial contributions to the collecting and assessing of historical materials in English-Canadian philosophy. Nonetheless, the work done by Armour and Trott is monumen-

tal in its ambition and unique in its value. More than ten years of research is represented by their *Faces of Reason*, and it documents the hundred years of philosophy which ended, as it were, with the arrival in Canada of Professor Sparshott. The century in question begins less symbolically, with the publication, in 1850, of "the first technical philosophical work written in English in Canada", James Beaven's *Elements of Natural Theology*. Beaven, it is the authors' remarkable claim, was brought to the University of Toronto to do an intellectual job of national importance. An antisestablishmentarian by long conviction, Beaven was to seek rational accounts of religion and society in a political context in which an established church was impossible. The *canadiens* of Lower Canada had achieved constitutional guarantee of the right to be Catholic, and in spite of the Protestant hopes which were eventually to lead to that miraculous accomplishment, the United Church, Canadians were nonetheless unalterably condemned to pluralism.

Is it a perance to read of James Beaven? Not at all. No-one who knew so much about road construction, or who was able to modify so many of his prejudices by visiting native Indians, could be a complete "dry old stick" (*Faces*, 34). And did he do his job? Well, he produced a sophisticated version of the Argument from Design. Armour and Trott give us a lucid sketch of philosophical theology in order to place this in its context, and their account of his reasoning is both sympathetic and critical. A reader might even be tempted to think that a reasoned account of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul was just the sort of appeal to common principles which a philosopher ought to make when faced with combative sectarianism.

The Faces of Reason offers chapters on some eighteen substantial figures. It may be clear already that their theories and proofs are never treated merely as timeless speculations, but are set in a richly-detailed cultural history. Leslie Armour's *The Idea of Canada* may seem a minor 'spin-off' from the main project; it restricts itself to political philosophy, and refers liberally to writings by the philosophers studied in the major book. It is, though, a quite distinct enterprise. It is contemporary rather than historical, aimed directly at the debates about a Canadian constitution, and intended as a contribution to the debate about the nature and future of Canada which was begun by George Grant's *Lament for a Nation* of 1965. It does not confine itself to English Canada, but makes good use of French philosophy (especially from earlier generations: Louis Lachance, Charles de Koninck, Louis-Adolphe Pâquet are notable examples). In fact the book casts a very wide net, with quick sketches on mental illness and Quebec 'press' responses to the French Revolution. It also aims at a wide audience; it

is cleverly illustrated with Canadian poster art of assorted vintages. Nor does it shrink from practical recommendations. One of my favourites is the bold notion that Francophones might be re-enfranchised west of the Great Lakes by establishing a new French-speaking port city as the second grain trans-shipment terminal on the B.C. coast. It would, as Armour points out, give British Columbians "access to a whole dimension of traditional Canadian political power" (*Idea*, 136).

The hope of the book is that there remains something to cherish from Canada's first century, and something on which to build. The danger is not our huge neighbours, either to the south or across the North Pole, but "the tendency to a unified faceless culture based on some form of possessive individualism" (*Idea*, 139). He dismisses as impossible alternatives both state collectivism and a deeply unified national culture. What we are is a country not like others; we are an assortment of communities. Each community provides a limited space within which individuality can develop; but we are not, and do not think of ourselves as, condemned to absolute freedom in a world in which we are utterly responsible for making ourselves whatever it is that we are or become. (Perhaps I may be forgiven this use of Sartre's terminology for characterizing pure individualism.) The pre-confederation communities formed an alliance from a common need for self-preservation, but they, and other communities built up since then, have more in common than an external co-occurrence of self-interests. They have, both tacitly, and in explicit political philosophies, a common commitment to the importance of community, and thus may be said, if I may borrow from an odd source, to form a real "community of communities". This commitment is far from consistent and far from universal, but Armour traces it through old disagreements between French Thomists and English Hegelians, through the history of Federal-Provincial relations, through the peculiarities of "Red-Tory" politics, and through the public enterprises in which Canadian governments have regularly invested.

The Idea of Canada is a swift and vigorous 'read'. It is, perhaps, typically Canadian in being both conservative (in its attachment to community) and progressive (in its championing of group rights and advocacy of "new forms of [collective] property" (*Idea*, 133-4). But the philosophical heart of the book is Armour's claim that Canadian thinkers have from the beginning been resistant to a certain interpretation of Descartes (*Idea*, 23). He is the father of modern subjective individualism (what is certain is that *I* exist; everything other than my own thinking is open to doubt). On the contrary, maintain the Canadians, community comes before individuality. "I would not know who I

was if I were alone in the universe" (*Idea*, 115). An argument for this is sketched at p. 70, and is associated with Louis Lachance and John Watson at pp. 84-85, but this seems to me to be so central to Armour's thesis that it demands extended debate rather than scattered recapitulation. In his *An Outline of Philosophy* (4th ed., 1908), John Watson, who dominated English-Canadian philosophy from his post at Queen's University from 1872 until his death in 1939, put the case this way:

To be conscious of myself implies that I am conscious of myself as possessing a character which distinguishes me from other modes of being. My individuality is for me the consciousness of what I feel, know, and will. But if I have no consciousness of what is felt, known, and willed by others, I must be incapable of distinguishing between myself and other selves. It is therefore only in relation and contrast to other selves that I become conscious of what I as an individual am. (*Faces*, 223)

If it is the various faces of 'community' which constitute the unity of Canada, it is the various faces of 'reason' which make up the family portrait of English-Canadian philosophy, according to Armour and Trott. The problem of unity in plurality is as old as philosophy. "What is the *one* thing had in common in virtue of which we call these *many* things by the same name?" asked Socrates, and Plato answered with the Theory of Forms. It is more fashionable today, however, to reject the question. In a celebrated passage of his *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) tells Socrates that:

These phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all, — but that they are *related* to one another in many different ways We see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than "family resemblances"³

On the one hand, Armour and Trott seem content with Wittgensteinian 'unity'. The "characteristic notions of reason" have tended to "change in ways which have paralleled the changes in other social phenomena", they say (*Faces*, xxiv). Many of the men here studied and worked in isolation from other Canadian philosophers. William Lyall, at Dalhousie until his death in 1890, "loved the seclusion of his study and the society of the mighty dead" (*Faces*, 62). Lacking colleagues in philosophy, many devoted themselves to influencing public policy in their areas. Wilfred Keirstead advised provincial governments while he was Professor at the University of New Brunswick; Herbert Stewart is still well remembered in Halifax not only for his renowned lectures on philosophy in modern literature, but also for his weekly radio broadcasts on the major political issues of the day; John MacDonald,

who should be studied at least by all Canadian philosophers of education, made a major contribution to the conception of a public education system for 'frontier' Alberta. All, like Beaven, tried to bring reason to bear on what would otherwise be settled by emotion and custom. But the reason they brought bore many varied faces.

On the other hand, Armour and Trott take one brave fling at Socratic unity. There is *a one feature* which all the Canadian faces of reason have in common. If we could make only one point in this book, they say, it would be this:

Dominantly in English Canadian philosophy reason is used as a device to explore alternatives, to suggest ways of combining apparently contradictory ideas, to discover new ways of passing from one idea to another. Only rarely is it used as an intellectual substitute for force — as a device to defeat one's opponent, to show his ideas to be without foundation, or to discredit his claims to philosophical thought. There is, in short, a kind of philosophical federalism at work (*Faces*, 4)

Now it seems that even if this hypothesis is true, it will not constitute a grand enough unifying principle to make a Canadian philosophy out of philosophy in Canada. We are unlikely to find 'English Canadian Reasonablism' alongside 'German Idealism' and 'British Empiricism' in the future histories of philosophy. Nevertheless, I am put in mind of accounts of reason which I learned as a student at Acadia and Alberta, and which my teachers undoubtedly had from their teachers (at Montréal and Dalhousie, respectively). As I peruse Armour and Trott the impression grows that among early Canadian philosophers the following line of thought is almost consuetudinary. Reason is first of all a space which differing humans share and move in. If it is conceived as fundamentally a tool in the hands of individuals, then it is inadequately conceived. This conviction has as a corollary that any ethical system which takes its start from rational, self-interested individuals (as utilitarianism, and social contract theory, e.g., are often thought to do) is founded on philosophical quicksand. This brings us around again to the argument which I cited from John Watson. It is within this circle of thought that the unity of the two books under review is to be found.

Finally one has to ask, will any of this music be played? C.B.C. listeners have recently heard much old Canadian music from the Sharon Festival, and know that even pieces of no historical moment can refresh and delight a contemporary audience. By this standard, Armour and Trott have uncovered for us many tunes which deserve to be replayed. Lyall on the place of human fallibility in moral psychology interests me. John Clark Murray comparing the intelligence required for running a household with that needed for working in a

factory ought to interest everybody, for there was solid philosophy behind his campaign to have women admitted to degree programmes at McGill. Moreover, the book is written with instructive sections of 'background'. There is an introduction to Kantian ethics to make Jacob Gould Schurman intelligible. (Schurman, a Prince Edward Islander, taught briefly at Acadia and Dalhousie in the 1880's before moving to the U.S.A. He became President of Cornell University, and among many other things, wrote often on the relevance of Darwinism to traditional ethics and religion.) There is an account of hedonism to make a foil for John Watson's ethics, and so on. It is not unreasonable to consider the experiment of using *The Faces of Reason* as a curious sort of introductory textbook. Clearly, then, this is a book which is not, as some will want to say, *merely* of historical interest.

Are there then Canadian philosophers of historical *importance*? Importance depends very much on one's impact on students and readers. (Imagine Socrates without Plato? or Wittgenstein without his covey of disciples and executors?) Many outstanding teachers are among the figures in this book. George Brett is conspicuous among them,⁴ although otherwise Armour and Trott seem to agree with Sparshott's opinion of his philosophical importance. Eventually such impact becomes indirect, and may cease to be acknowledged, or cease to exist. Now consider the case of McGill University. John Clark Murray moved to the philosophy department there from Queen's just a few years after Confederation. He died in 1917. The range of his philosophy, the vigour of his involvement in public issues, the progressiveness of his political philosophy, all make him an exciting writer to rediscover. But recent generations of McGill philosophers, born long since his death (I am thinking, e.g., of Charles Taylor, Gerald Cohen, Marc Glouberman), continue to be sympathetic to his critique of industrial capitalism, still share his Aristotelian conviction that man is a political animal, a member of a community or not a man at all. Is this accidental? Or is there a debt here which deserves reavowing?

The history of the second century in English-Canadian philosophy will not be written for a while yet. Much of the philosophy practised in Canada since the 1950's has thought of itself as drawing exclusively on non-Canadian sources of inspiration, but the mark which the first century will have left on the second is not yet determined. Meanwhile, it is a privilege, not a penance, to be able to read the almost mighty dead. *The Faces of Reason* is much more than a monument.

NOTES

1. Francis Sparshott, "National Philosophy", *Dialogue* (1977), pp. 3-21, 16-17.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
3. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), Part I, paragraphs 65-67.
4. Ernest Buckler pays this tribute: "What stand out far in the forefront of all this, though, are my tutorial sessions with Professor George Brett. I was continually in awe of his giant intellect, literally convinced that he knew everything — but with his pure and distillate certainties (combined with a gentle charm of person), he set my thinking straight in more ways than I can count. He was a man to revere. And I revere him . . . still." *Whirligig* (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1977), pp. 11-12.